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The Effects of Fostering on Communication and Marital Quality
in the Marital Dyadic Relationship

The Effects of Fostering on Communication and Marital Quality
in the Marital Dyadic Relationship

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communication

by

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University of Arkansas
Bachelor of Arts in Communication, 2011

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the phenomena of foster parents' marital relationships and the emotional stress felt by each spouse. Results revealed a positive correlation between marital quality and perceived spousal support and a negative correlation between either marital quality or perceived spousal support and emotional stress associated with disciplining the foster child. Analyses also showed that emotional stress associated with being a foster parent positively correlated with emotional stress associated with both the child's past and the possibility of the child being moved. These results underscore the importance of spousal communication, marital quality, and perceived spousal support as a stress reducer for foster parents.

Keywords: foster parent, marital quality, spousal support

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Chapter One
INTRODUCTION

At the end of fiscal year 2011, over 400,000 children were in the US foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). According to Herman's Adoption History Project (2012), foster care began around 1910 by reformers such as Henry Chapin, who worked to place children in homes rather than unhealthy orphanages. Though social service officials preferred that children were in the charge of blood relatives, this was not always desirable or possible. Thus, social workers attempted to place children in the best situations available, though this also meant that foster parents had to navigate the psychological or physical problems that often accompany foster children. Over time, orphanages were eradicated from the US in favor of foster care. By 1950, the number of children in foster care outnumbered those in institutions, and these numbers continued to widen in favor of foster care over the next 20 years (Herman).

With foster care as the preferred alternative to an institution, there was a dire need for foster parents and families to take foster children into their homes. Caring for an extra child and coping with the child's potential problems—emotional, mental, and/or physical—can take a toll on those individuals and their personal relationships. According to Hayek, Mackie, Mule, Bellonci, Hyde, Bakan, and Leslie (2013), foster “children entering foster care have elevated rates of mental health problems” (p. 2). Likewise, foster parents are unclear about how to raise a foster child due to lack of information or training making these placements difficult (Leathers, Spielfogel, McMeel, & Atkins, 2011). These often temporary placements typically result in extreme stress and strain on existing familial relationships, such as the marital dyad.

Marital relationships are studied frequently with a focus on parenting skills, such as creating secure attachments and parent-child conflict (La Valley & Guerrero, 2012) and the parent-child relationship, but little to no research has been conducted with the foster parents

solely in mind. Also, no published communication studies exist examining how stress associated with participation in the foster care system affects the marital dyad serving as foster parents.

Marital stress is a phenomenon that is studied in Communication literature, but not in the unique context of raising foster children. In the research discussed below, literature describing the stressors associated with parenting children in foster care is reviewed to further understand the phenomenon with an emphasis on the marital dyad that has been overlooked thus far, specifically regarding marital quality and perceived spousal support.

Chapter Two
LITERATURE REVIEW

Children in foster care face many challenges due to their unique circumstances, such as medical and behavioral issues (Hayek, et al., 2013). Therefore, it also is important to understand how foster parents cope with these challenges alongside the children. For a child from outside the home, the foster family must make necessary adjustments to welcome the child, such as establishing authority, sharing of responsibilities, the forming of attachments, and maintenance of discipline (Mosek, 2004). While adjustments are necessary, many potential stressors confront persons choosing to foster.

Foster Parenting and Stress

Within the foster system, a great number of children experience physical, mental, and emotional health issues. Children and adolescents in the system often report high levels of health problems (Farruggia & Sorkin, 2009), and are more at risk for chronic illness and mental health issues than children not in foster care (Woods, Farineau, and McWey, 2011). According to Jones and Morris (2012), children may enter the foster system due to abuse or neglect, which can induce additional problems (e.g., academic, social, behavioral, and psychological). Foster parents must use some types of resources in order to cope with these problems. Ultimately, these problems may create relational stress in the marital dyad. Further, children placed in foster care have a lack of medical history which complicates any future need for medical help (Hayek, et al., 2013). Potentially, these concerns may place added stress on the marital dyad.

Placement into foster care can prompt many emotions in children, which may elevate parental stress. For example, children may blame themselves for being placed into the foster care system (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010). Recently placed children often experience a distinct sense of either physical or psychological loss due to separation from their families or former caregivers

(Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010). This potential lack of permanence may create attachment difficulties for foster parents and the children.

When a foster child experiences health issues, constant movement can worsen existing problems. According to Eggertsen (2008), children are more likely to be placed in multiple homes if they have physical health problems, which then can lead to instability in both health care and attention given to health problems. Furthermore, constant movement also affects mental health leading to behavioral issues (Woods, Farineau, and McWey, 2011). Therefore, the combination of physical, mental and behavioral health issues place an adolescent at more risk for multiple foster placements (Eggertsen, 2008). This negative cycle affects not only the child, but also the foster parents and can lead to more extreme problems.

In long-term foster care, foster parents experience specific stressors resulting from fostering such as maintaining contact with biological parents, meeting the expectations of the foster care system and social workers, and helping the child acclimate to the new environment. Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaellie, Holan, Maeyer, & Robberechts (2013) found that foster mothers experienced more stress with children who had externalizing problems (acting out in such ways as aggression) than did any other group in the study. Though all focus group participants in this study reported feeling stress, the externalized problems were more stressful and added to the stressors experienced by other issues, such as melding the child into the family, communicating with the social worker or learning to effectively discipline.

Many foster parents, though legally allowed to be foster families, are ill-equipped to take on children with behavioral, emotional or mental issues or to effectively cope with the resultant stress. According to a study by Spielfogel, Leathers, Christian, and McMeel (2011), foster parents typically lack “parent management training” (PMT). PMT is a program that helps parents

improve their parenting skills and more effectively manage children's behaviors. PMT benefits the foster parents whose foster children display psychological and behavioral problems, and thus provides resources for relating to and effectively disciplining the foster children. Training is important for foster parents because, according to Shlonsky and Berrick (2001), foster parents experience stress due to their being held to a higher standard of parenting by the state than do individuals who do not foster. This is because the state has assumed responsibility for the child and placed the child into the care of foster parents assumed to be prepared to manage the stress associated with the parenting role (Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001).

While training works, to some degree, to ready foster parents, foster fathers also must work against negative stereotypes. Foster parents are not necessarily seen as equals in their roles as parents. Foster fathers have been studied and included in the foster family dynamic even less than foster mothers. In fact, foster fathers "are described in a distinctly negative manner within the CWS (Child Welfare Service)" (Storhaug, 2013, p. 1751). As a result, social workers and the CWS focuses more heavily on the foster mother than the foster father (Storhaug, 2013). Not only are foster fathers viewed more negatively, foster mothers are viewed as more responsible in taking charge and rearing the children while fathers are left fighting this traditional viewpoint of parenting (Storhaug, 2013; Storhaug & Oien, 2012). Foster parents also experience high stress levels when dealing with the foster care system. According to Leathers, Atkins, Spielfogel, McMeel, Wesley, and Davis (2009), foster parents experienced more stress when they felt unsupported by the social worker. Moreover, foster parents indicated they did not always have control over decisions concerning the children in their care. Any major decision had to be approved by the social worker, who may not have fully understood the situation or the full reasoning behind the necessary action. Hence, foster parents sometimes felt completely left out

of the decision-making process. When experiencing these stressors the foster parents stated they had no outlets within the foster care system for discussing problems or frustrations they experienced or aspects of the system that needed to be addressed or changed. Geiger, Hayes, and Lietz (2013) note that foster parents rarely talk about their satisfaction levels of being foster parents. The combination of these different stressors makes social support an integral aspect of foster parenting success.

Social Support for Managing Stress

Encouragement through social support is “one of the most studied social processes of the last several decades” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 10). Its function is described as “enabling us to build a safe base from which to confront the hassles of daily life” (Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011, p. 335). Social support is manifested through both perceived and enacted support, and the presence of both are important for effective coping with stress.

Perceived social support involves what persons think about the help they receive from others, whereas enacted social support may be verbal or indirect actions assisting another to cope with stressful life events. Perceived social support may be felt by the distressed person but not knowingly given by the sender of support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Enacted social support, on the other hand, is support knowingly given from someone in the distressed person’s social network acting to “promote healthful norms and provide resources for following them” (Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011, p. 338). Each of these types of social support is helpful when one confronts stressors, and each type is communicated by the sender to the receiver. Perceived social support is something received through a communicative act, either verbal or nonverbal. Therefore, for someone to recognize the presence of social support, either perceived or enacted, social support is communicated within the dyad.

Within the two types of social support, there are many sub-types and each is vital in fully understanding the coping mechanisms on which people rely (Xu & Burleson, 2003). According to Goldsmith (2004), there are six types of social support: emotional support, informational support, tangible support, appraisal support, esteem support, and network support. The most common types of support offered in the literature include emotional support involving expressed concern and empathy and “reassurance of worth” (p. 13). Informational support occurs through giving facts related to the stressor or advice and possibly a different perspective on the issue. Tangible support involves physical support where the supporter offers goods or services to the supportee in times of need. Appraisal support provides validation of the supportee’s coping strategies, while esteem support is raising the supportee's self-worth. Lastly, network support, a type of support included in only some taxonomies, consists of belonging to a group or socializing (Goldsmith, 2004).

Foster parents experience a very distinct set of stressors, such as how to discipline, when assuming the responsibility of a foster child, which makes social support important. Deciding how to appropriately discipline a child is a difficult process for any parent. For foster parents, this decision is more pronounced because a foster child is not necessarily permanent in their home and under their care. According to Orme and Buehler (2001), discipline is one of the most studied phenomena within foster care literature and is associated with marital quality. Orme and Buehler state that spouses who disagree over how to discipline are evaluated more poorly than foster homes in which spouses agree on discipline strategies.

In the present study, understanding foster parents’ perception of the social support received in the marital dyad will provide a greater understanding of how social support and stressors associated with fostering are connected. In this case, there is a significant gap in the

literature pertaining to how foster parents' cope with stressors. The focus of literature usually is directed to foster children with little attention to their foster parents. With this in mind, it is important to look at the marital dyad to see how couples rely on mutual support and how the quality of their relationship affects coping with stress associated with fostering.

The Marital Dyad

The marital dyad is a well-studied phenomena, but studies concerning the marital dyad's coping mechanisms in the presence of stress has not been studied fostering marital dyads. The marital dyad is an integral part of foster families, so the parents' relationship must be addressed to fully describe the communication characteristic of foster families. Schwartz (2008) suggests that, though structure is important in a foster family, relational quality and strength are most important to bind the new family together, including the marital quality of the foster parents. Although it may take placement in three or four families before finding the proper fit, Schofield, Beck, and Ward (2012) state that greater success in family placement results from matching a child to a family in which there is less stress in the marital dyad. It stands to reason that familial stability is fed through marital stability.

One's spouse is an important source of support (Walen and Lachman, 2000). In a study by Xu and Burleson (2004), social support is stated as both an important provision and determinant in marital satisfaction. Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, Bradbury (2010) studied newlyweds in association with social support from spouses and found a correlation between problem-solving behaviors in social support and level of marital satisfaction. Thus, the perception that social support is communicated within a marital dyad should enhance the overall communication quality as well as the quality of the marriage.

The job of raising children is both difficult and stressful for any marital couple. The stressors of fostering a child are different from those experienced with a child adopted early in life or one who is biological to the couple. When raising a child, either biological or adopted, the marital couple has latitude to choose what they feel are the best options, such as education, medical care, or discipline. However, when the child has been placed in their home through the foster care system the couple may no longer have complete control over how the child is raised, which can result in conflict and resultant stress. According to Bodenmann, Meuwly, Bradbury, Gmelch, and Ledermann (2010), women feeling stress tend to act out in anger, while men become more withdrawn. The addition of stress into the marital relationship makes communication more challenging, which can affect how each member of the marital dyad interact with one another. These behaviors actually can have a negative impact and increase stress levels. Also, the presence of stress inside or outside the relationship can deteriorate the marital relationship (Bodenmann, 2005). Frye and Karney (2006) state that “circumstances that drain partners’ emotional resources may make effective interaction more difficult” (p. 18).

One must also understand how the marital relationship connects to those persons outside of the dyad. If there is turmoil within the relationship, it is felt by children (Caughlin & Huston, 2006). Therefore, the marital dyad has a responsibility to those who are affected directly by their relationship to minimize stress and conflict in the family. Positive family relational health creates a more solid and stable attachment, spousal and parental. These stressors and reactions to stressors affect foster parents specifically because they are held to a higher standard as state-induced parents (Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001). While parents of biological children also deal with this similar stress, foster parents have foster children who come from home upheaval. Stability, then, is an important aspect for increasing familial comfort and directly combat any physical,

mental, emotional or behavioral issues from “multiple placements and failed attachments” (Jones & Morris, 2012, p. 143). It stands to reason that the health of the marital relationship results in greater or less attachment for the foster child as marital stress compromises the cohesiveness of the family as a whole. Instilling a stable home life enables children learn to effectively communicate and imitate the parents’ model of competently solving problems and communication skills (Schrodt, Ledbetter, Jernberg, Larson, Brown, & Glonek, 2009). Stress management is an integral aspect of the marital dyad to maintain its health and, ultimately, aid in cultivating positive parent-child attachment.

Both spousal support and marital quality are important aspects of the marital dyad. The interconnectedness is found in studies with distinct family circumstances. For example, Baird-Fassardi (2003) focused on marital quality and social support during pregnancy, and Mickelson, Claffey, and Williams (2005) studied gender role and gender role attitudes particularly with marital quality and social support. While no study examined spousal support and marital quality associated with the foster parent dyad, the specific circumstances show a strong correlation between these two variables. It can be possible, then, that a correlation should exist between spousal support and marital quality for foster parents based on the relationships found in the above described studies.

Research Questions

Foster children have been researched quite thoroughly in psychology and social work research. Foster parents also have been researched, but minimally, in terms of foster parent training and strategies facilitating a successful reception of a foster child into the family. Few communication studies have focused on the complexities associated with foster care as a source of marital stress (see Orme and Buehler, 2001), and Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaeillie, Holen,

Maeyer, and Robberechts, 2013) for exceptions). Foster parents have not been studied from the viewpoint of their marital relationship and how fostering affects their relationship.

Hence, it is pertinent to explore the degree to which married foster parents experience stress resulting from effectively disciplining foster children, managing issues associated with the foster child's emotional and behavioral stability due to their history, and concerns with the length of placement of the child in their home. Additionally, it is important to study the ways in which foster parents rely on perceived social support from their spouse. The presence of support should impact their efforts to cope with such potential stressors and ultimately the perceived quality of the dyad's marriage. All of these topics are salient to further understand how foster families work to envelop a child into their fold. Therefore, the following research questions will guide the study:

RQ1: What are the relationships among the following stressors experienced by foster parents: determining appropriate discipline strategies, managing histories, the child's potential movement, and being foster parents in general?

RQ2: What is the relationship between quality of marriage and stressors experienced by foster parents?

RQ3: What is the relationship between perceived social support and stressors experienced by foster parents?

RQ4: What is the relationship between perceived social support and marital quality?

Chapter Three
METHODOLOGY

Procedure

After gaining acquiescence from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board and the foster care worker assigned to eight counties in Arkansas, a digital letter with University of Arkansas letterhead was attached to an email explaining the project and the need for foster parents to take part in and complete the survey (see Appendices A & B). To add incentive for foster parents to complete the survey, a drawing for the chance to win a \$100 gift card to Wal-Mart was included. Following the completion of the survey, foster parents could choose to email the researcher and ask to be included in the drawing for the gift card. Foster parents were not required to email the researcher to take part in the survey itself and could submit their completed survey without entering the drawing. There was no connection to the identity of the person completing the survey and their survey responses.

To contact the foster parents, the researcher began the process by meeting with a local attorney with vast experience working with foster children. Contact information was given for three foster recruits with access to the email addresses of all the foster parents within their represented areas of the state. Each area consisted of more than one county, so the foster recruits were able to forward an email from the researcher explaining the project to larger portions of the state. Contact information was given to the researcher to another foster recruit through one of the three original foster recruits, expanding my study to include Pulaski and Saline Counties. The emails described the purpose for my study, what the survey entailed, the incentive of a drawing for a \$100 gift card, and the link to the survey (see Appendix C). The emails also contained an attachment of the letter on University of Arkansas letterhead to be forwarded to foster parents. The winner of the drawing was chosen using the random number selection through Excel.

Participants

Demographically, the group of foster parents was not widely varied. Sixty-five married individuals residing in Arkansas who foster or have fostered in the past participated in the survey (57 females, 8 males). Of the 65 individuals, 60 fully completed the survey, while the remaining 5 respondents left some questions unanswered. Foster parents from the following eight counties took part in the survey: Benton, Carroll, Garland, Madison, Polk, Pulaski, Saline, and Washington.

An online link to Survey Monkey, where the survey was administered online, was included in the letter for the participants to gain access to the survey. Because the individuals were contacted by the foster agencies, participants' identification information was not collected, thus maintaining anonymity throughout the survey completion process. The first page of the survey consisted of an implied consent form to be read by participants. The consent form contained a statement indicating that completion and submission of the survey identified participant consent for their responses to be used in the summary of the results.

Measures

The survey began by asking the participants' sex, county of residence, and how many children/foster children currently reside in the home (see Appendix D), then went directly into the Likert-scale questions. Four questions were asked pertaining to stressors faced by the foster parent and his/her spouse. These questions asked about emotional stress associated with discipline, managing histories, the possibility of the child being moved, and being foster parents in general. These questions were answered on a Likert-type scale with responses ranging from 1 to 7 with 1 being very strongly agree and 7 being very strongly disagree (see Appendix E). Similar Likert-type scales were used throughout the remainder of the survey.

The next section of questions emphasized social support from the spouse (see Appendix F). The questions were derived from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) developed by Canty-Mitchell and Zimet (2000). Each question was asked with reference to how the foster parents perceive the availability of social support from his/her spouse. The MSPSS is a scale widely used, and found to be psychometrically sound (Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000) and appropriate for use with different populations. For example, Dahlem, Zimet, and Walker (1991) used the MSPSS to study urban college students, while Cecil, Stanley, Carrion and Swann (1995) used the MSPSS to study psychiatric outpatients.

The final section of questions addressed the perceived marital quality of the foster parent with regard to his/her spouse. Responses to these questions, like the earlier questions, included a Likert-type scale with responses ranging from 1 to 7 with 1 being very strongly agree and 7 being very strongly disagree (see Appendix G). These questions mirror the Partner Communication Scale, such as the one used in a study by Norton (1983). Norton states that the Partner Communication Scale “represents a variegated approach to understanding communicative phenomena as they relate to quality marriage” (144).

Chapter Four

RESULTS

Average scores of items assessing foster parent stress also were calculated to understand the depth of stress felt by foster parents for each of the four studied stressors. Each of the questions pertaining to stress was measured using a Likert-like scale of one to seven, with one being very strongly agree and seven being very strongly disagree. The mean score for stress associated with discipline was 3.20. The mean score for stress associated with the child's past was 3.57. The average score for stress associated with possible relocation was 4.30. The mean score for stress associated with being a foster parent in general was 3.98. Foster parents felt the most stress associated with the child possibly being moved, with stress associated with being a foster parent in general not far behind. Discipline showed the lowest average of stress, while stress associated with the child possibly being moved was over a point higher. Understanding the mean scores for each stressor offers insight into how stressed each possibility made them feel.

A principal component factor analysis was run on each of the three scales to see how the questions associated with each of the variables loaded. The items for each variable loaded separately from one another (see Tables 1, 2, and 3).

Table 1. Factor Analysis of Emotional Stress

Emotional Stress	
Being foster parents	.767
Child's past	.680
Location movement	.629
Discipline	.500

42.43% variance explained.

Note. Eigenvalues of < 1.0 are suppressed

Table 2. Factor Analysis of Marital Quality

	Marital Quality
Good marriage	.961
Stable relationship	.967
Strong marriage	.969
Happy with spouse	.943
Feel like team	.885
Want to end relationship reverse code	.892
Not want to be married reverse code	.364
Similar attitude	.424
Outside interests together	.577
Committed to relationship	.773

65.09% variance explained.

Note. Eigenvalues of < 1.0 are suppressed

Table 3. Factor Analysis of Spousal Support

Spousal Support	
Source of comfort	.900
Cares about feelings	.881
Help with decisions	.876
Emotional support	.868
Talking to spouse	.861
There when needed	.861
Reliance on spouse	.860
Sharing joys and sorrows	.860
Spousal help	.830

75.10% variance explained.

Note. Eigenvalues of < 1.0 are suppressed

To identify the internal consistency of the scales, the items associated with each of the variables were tested individually using Cronbach's alpha. Emotional stress did not have high reliability ($\alpha = .538$). Kline (1999) states that a reliable number when assessing reliability using Cronbach's alpha is .7 or above. Because the reliability for measuring emotional stress is lower than the preferred amount, the four questions that constituted emotional stress remained separate as opposed to combining them into one variable. Therefore, four distinct variables were included in further analysis: stress associated with discipline, stress associated with the child's past, stress associated with the prospect of the child being moved, and stress associated with being a foster parent. Both spousal support ($\alpha = .958$) and marital quality ($\alpha = .929$) had high reliability.

Because of their high reliability, the averages were used for both spousal support and marital quality to assess each as its own individual variable. Pearson correlations then were run to assess how each variable affected the others (see Table 4).

Table 4. Pearson Product-Moment Correlations of Foster Parent Stressors, Social Support, and Marital Quality

	Discipline	Child's past	Location movement	Being foster parents	MSPSS Global	Quality Global
Discipline	1	.247	.049	.196	-.455**	-.407**
N	61	60	60	60	58	57
Child's past	.247	1	.191	.300*	-.014	-.158
N	60	60	60	60	58	57
Location movement	.049	.191	1	.370**	.161	.030
N	60	60	60	60	58	57
Being foster parents	.196	.300*	.370**	1	-.067	-.126
N	60	60	60	60	58	57
MSPSS Global	-.455**	-.014	.161	-.067	1	.737**
N	58	58	58	58	58	56
Quality Global	-.407**	-.158	.030	-.126	.737**	1
N	57	57	57	57	56	57

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

RQ1: How stressful do married foster parents perceive determining appropriate discipline strategies, managing histories, the child's potential movement, and being foster parents in general? Emotional stress associated with being foster parents was positively correlated with the emotional stress associated with the child's past ($r = .300, p < .05$). It also was positively correlated with emotional stress associated with the possibility of the child being moved ($r = .370, p < .01$). There was no significant correlation between emotional stress associated with child's past and stress associated with discipline ($r = .247$). Emotional stress associated with the possibility of the child being moved and stress associated with discipline also showed no significant correlation ($r = .049$). Likewise, there was no significant correlation between emotional stress associated with being a foster parent and stress associated with discipline ($r = .134$).

RQ2: How is quality of the marriage affected by stressors associated with fostering? There was a significant negative correlation between quality of marriage and the emotional stress related to discipline ($r = -.407, p < .01$). There were no other significant correlations between quality of marriage and emotional stressors associated with the child's past ($r = -.158$), the possibility of the child being moved ($r = .030$), or stress associated with being a foster parent ($r = -.126$).

RQ3: How is perceived social support affected by stressors associated with fostering? Perceived social support was negatively correlated with the emotional stress of disciplining ($r = -.455, p < .01$). There were no other significant correlations between perceived social support and emotional stress associated with the child's past ($r = -.014$), the possibility of the child being moved ($r = .161$), or stress associated with being a foster parent ($r = -.067$).

RQ4: How does the perceived support received by one's spouse influence the quality of the marriage for foster parents? There was a strong significant positive correlation between perceived support received by one's spouse and quality of marriage ($r = .737, p < .01$).

The four pursued research questions show strong correlations between certain stressors, marital quality, and perceived spousal support. As marital quality increases, perceived spousal support also increases. When either marital quality or perceived spousal support increase, stress associated with discipline decreases. It is interesting to note that while stress associated with discipline decreases as quality and support increase, the other emotional stressors are not significantly altered. Emotional stress associated with the child's past, the possibility of the child being moved, and stress of being foster parents were correlated strongly together but had no bearing on discipline, marital quality or perceived spousal support.

Chapter Five
DISCUSSION

Summary of Results

The purpose of the study was to examine how fostering affects the marital dyad with regard to perceived spousal support, perceived marital quality, and emotional stress associated with being a foster parent, deciding how to discipline, managing the child's history and the possibility of relocation to another foster family. By understanding the correlations among these variables, current and future foster parents may more fully understand how perceived social support and marital quality affect emotional stress. There were 65 participants, making the results and subsequent findings limited, but the significant results still give insight into foster parent stress, marital quality, and social support.

Interpretation of Findings

As foster parents deal with histories (such as biological parents, mental, emotional or physical disorders), stress associated with being a foster parent increases. These parents attempt to juggle different aspects of the child's life while also trying to decide how to deal with any medical problems. According to Helgeson, Becker, Escobar, and Siminerio (2012), parental stress increases resulting in the child experiencing poorer health outcomes. Therefore, if the child has health issues associated with their past, the poorer the outcome of that health issue, the higher the stress for foster parents. This compounds if the couple has other children (either biological, foster, or adopted) and are trying to equally take care of them. Five research questions were asked.

RQ1: How stressful do married foster parents perceive determining appropriate discipline strategies, managing histories, the child's potential movement, and being foster parents in general? It is interesting to note that while three of the emotional stressors are associated with one another, there was not a significant correlation among those three and stress

associated with discipline. A potential explanation could be that greater amounts of the stress associated with being a foster parent result from circumstances over which foster parents perceive they have little control. It may be the case that foster parents do not view determining discipline as stressful because they can control how they choose to do so. In contrast, they may see the other factors as stressful because they have no control over the child's past or if the child will be relocated. These findings are similar to those associated with control orientation, or the amount of control persons perceive they have in a given situation (Shorten, 1996). Examining stressors from within an internal control orientation, one may view the stress associated with fostering as resulting from factors within their own control. An external control orientation would result in seeing those factors beyond one's control as the most stressful. According to Shorten (1996) with regards to parents of autistic children, problems seen as outside of the parent's control were linked with increased stress. Potentially, foster parents have a similar reaction as control orientation may affect marital quality regarding how much control the dyad actually has with the particular type of stressor. Though situations are significantly different between the two groups, parents of autistic children and parents of foster children face stressors unique to their family structure. In this way, the two can be compared in terms of how these parenting groups of parents experience and cope with stress.

RQ2: How is quality of the marriage affected by stressors associated with fostering?

Quality of marriage was negatively correlated with the emotional stress associated with discipline but was not correlated with managing histories or possible relocation. To put it simply, as marital quality increased, stress due to disciplining the foster children decreased. According to Harper, Taylor, Harper, Olsen Roper, and South (2013) in a study of parental stress with autistic children, increased stress and marital quality were negatively correlated. As the parent

experienced more stress, marital quality declined. However, as stress decreased, marital quality began to increase. It also is reasonable that marital quality does not correlate with stress associated with managing histories or stress associated with relocation because these two stressors are out of the foster parent's control, as these factors were viewed as more stressful. While discipline is up to the foster parents, the foster parents cannot control the history of the child or if they are relocated. When foster parents experience lack of control, it is possible that their stress levels increase which can affect marital quality. Bodenmann, Meuwly, Bradbury, Gmelch and Ledermann (2010) discuss the ways in which each sex deals with stress. Since women tend to get angry and men tend to become withdrawn, a lack of control would add to stress and increase these reactions. If these reactions continue, Frye and Karney (2006) state that effective interactions between spouses can become more difficult, perpetuating the cycle.

RQ3: How is perceived social support affected by stressors associated with fostering?

Like marital quality, perceived spousal support was negatively correlated with stress associated with discipline, meaning that as perceived spousal support increased, stress associated with discipline decreased. According to Walsh-Rother (2003) in a study of expecting marital dyads, psychological functioning was directly and importantly related to adequate spousal support. This study exemplifies the importance of spousal support for the mental health of each spouse, and working through stress is no exception. In the present study there was no significant correlation between spousal support and the stressors associated with managing histories or possible relocation, meaning that spousal support, managing histories and possible relocation do not greatly affect one another. Again, foster parents may employ a more external control orientation over these two aspects of fostering. Where they have control of how to discipline the child, they have no control over the child's history or whether or not the child will be relocated.

RQ4: How does the perceived support received by one's spouse influence the quality of the marriage for foster parents? According to Groeneweg (1995), social support and marital quality are vastly linked, and the same is true for the present study. There was a positive correlation between marital quality and spousal support, so as marital quality increases so does spousal support. This finding is supported by Xu and Burleson (2004) who state that, "research suggests social support is one of the most important provisions of the marital relationship and an important determinant of marital satisfaction" (p. 123). It is important for foster parents to realize that foster parenting is a collaborative process as opposed to operating with separate ideas; therefore, it is logical that these two variables would be tightly intertwined. Perception of the strength of the marriage is greatly impacted by the view that one's spouse provides effective social support. According to Beach and Gupta (2006), spousal support is comprised of behaviors viewed by the receiver as helpful when dealing with different stressors. Cutrona (1996) also states that spousal support is essential for coping with problems or stressors effectively. The communication of each type of spousal support is what helps the receiving spouse cope with stressors. This explains why the communication and realization of spousal support is essential to marital satisfaction. Because marriage is considered deeply emotional, spousal support contributes strongly to marital satisfaction (Xu & Burleson, 2003).

Within all of these findings is a common thread: control orientation appears to affect what foster parents perceive is stressful about the fostering experience. Stress associated with the child moving or the child's past were not correlated with marital quality or spousal support, suggesting that control over stress affects how these stressors impact the marriage. The reverse could also be the case. Stress affects the marriage when there is a perceived lack of control. High

levels of stress associated with being a foster parent, in general, result from concerns the child's past or possible removal from the home.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study had many limitations that can be rectified in future trials. First, this study only had 65 participants due to the time constraints for completing the study and the difficulty reaching the foster parent population. Time given for the survey was two months and many foster parents who were contacted through email failed to respond. Had there been a longer time period to glean information, the survey would have been emailed to foster parents in the remaining counties in Arkansas as well as other states to increase numbers and variability of the sample. For future studies, ample time would be a must to obtain a larger population, and having a more representative sample of the foster parent community would be ideal. The actual sample consisted of a homogeneous group--mostly mothers of similar demographic characteristics. Fostering agencies could be contacted in different states in a random sampling method to increase the number of participants with more diverse backgrounds. It may be the case that perceptions of stressors, spousal support, and marital quality would differ with a less homogeneous sample. It also may be the case that contrasting responses may be found of foster fathers in comparison to foster mothers since research shows that males and females perceive and respond to stressors differently (Bodenmann, Meuwly, Bradbury, Gmelch and Ledermann, 2010). Because this study did not have a larger number of participants, future studies, therefore, are necessary to discover if these findings are consistent across a larger and more diverse population.

Further, the participants of the survey were self-selected as they received the email and chose to click the link and complete the survey, so they already hold a high value for the subject

matter and are computer literate. For more varied results, reaching a more diverse population from different parts of the country would guarantee a broader range of married foster parents. Additionally, gathering participants through blogs, forums, or letters would be a way to vary the population and reach both the computer literate and those without computer knowledge or access. If one were to select potential participants from a variety of blogs and forums for foster parents, researchers could pick and choose a more varied population to participate in the survey.

Because of the socioeconomic status often held by foster parents, administering the survey online resulted in limiting the generalizability of the findings for the study to all married persons who foster. According to O'Hare (2008), "analysis shows that compared to all households with children, households with foster children are more likely to be low-income families . . . have a lower average household income . . . and more likely to report receiving public assistance income" (p. 3). However, the contacts with the foster care system extensively use email as a means of communicating with foster parents on a regular basis and great attempts to collect the responses from married foster parents were made from across geographical areas of the state crossing a range of socioeconomic standings.

A third limitation in this study was the structure of the survey. The survey questions were Likert-scale questions with no short answer options. This decreased the amount of information received and limited the depth of the answers that could be given by the foster parents. Likert-like questions ask for the opinion ranging from very strongly agree to very strongly disagree, but they do not ask for an explanation. This study does not offer explanations for why the foster parents experienced stress associated with discipline or an instance in which they felt stress associated with the child's past. This information could more fully explain the nature of fostering and resultant stress. In future research, interviews or small group questioning would be more

beneficial to discover more intimate answers from the foster parents and increase understanding of the stressful situations with which they face daily.

The apparent influence control orientation was a surprising aspect that came out of this study. Its importance emerged within the context of stress associated with a controllable stressor (discipline) and marital quality or spousal support. Further, it is not known if there is an explanation for the correlation between uncontrollable stressors (the child's past or the child being moved) with being a foster parent. In future research, control orientation could be examined within the study to understand what role perceived internal or external control plays with foster parenting and stress.

Practical Applications

There are two groups of people who would benefit both from this study and future research of this population: social workers who work with foster parents and foster children, and foster parents themselves. Social workers focusing on foster care need to understand how communication affects stress, marital quality and perceived spousal support. If they understand the importance of communication, they also would understand the need for foster parents to communicate, not only with each other, but with the social worker in charge of the case. With foster parents and social workers partnering more effectively, there could be an increase in clarity for the foster parents and a decrease of misunderstanding and insecurity for both the parents and the child. According to Murray, Tarren-Sweeney and France (2010), foster parents require the communication and support from the social worker involved in their case. The increase in communication between social workers and their encouragement to foster parents to communicate have the potential to increase satisfaction and support of the couple, thus increasing the overall strength of the relationship.

Current and potential foster parents also have a need for the information pertaining to their satisfaction as spouse and parent. Gibbs and Wildfire (2007) state that most foster parents have the foster child an average of 8 to 14 months before discontinuing care. Perception is powerful when remembering instances and can influence emotions as well as actions. If foster parents understand how their own perceptions affect their relationship, they might be able to share their perceptions with their spouse and begin working as a team instead of being separate entities. While there always will be conflict and problems as both spouses and parents, an increase in understanding, including perceived emotions or realities, will then increase teamwork and inclusion and decrease a separatist mindset.

Conclusion

Overall, this research is exploratory in nature but is pioneering the subject matter of a less traditional family life than those previously studied. Foster families are intricate and complicated, like any other family, however, there is the added element of non-permanence. By exploring the relationships of the parents, who have never been studied, valuable information is gathered useful for educating current and future foster parents to understand how fostering creates very different familial circumstances and thus stressors. As seen, stress related to discipline increases if marital quality and perceived spousal support decrease, while stress associated with relocation or the child's history increase as the stress associated with being a foster parent also increases. These connections are important to realize as a foster parent so they can be combatted in order to strengthen their marital relationship.

Corollary analyses of the data revealed that as foster parents' spousal support increases, so does the marital quality. Further, as stress related to the child's history or relocation increases, stress related to being foster parents also increases. Finally, stress related to discipline decreases

as spousal support and marital quality increase. These findings allow the inference that as marital quality and spousal support increase, some emotional stress decreases; however, there always will be a presence of emotional stress when dealing with certain aspects of the foster children's histories and the prospect of relocation.

Because this is an unstudied population, the findings from the present study show new information that will add to the knowledge of how foster parents or potential foster parents can communicate in the marital dyad. By learning the significant stressors and ways to combat those stressors, foster parents can strengthen their relationship with each other and their children. Understanding the triggers for foster parents in terms of support, quality, and stress offers a new insightful way to increase satisfaction in the family unit.

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Appendix A
(IRB Approval)

November 27, 2013

MEMORANDUM

TO: Katie Russell
Patricia Amason

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 13-11-307

Protocol Title: *The Effects of Fostering on Communication and Marital Quality in the Marital Dyadic Relationship*

Review Type: ☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 11/27/2013 Expiration Date: 11/26/2014

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 150 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.

Appendix B
(Foster Parent Letter)

[Department Letterhead]

Dear Foster Parent,

I am a graduate student studying communication at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. My research is focused on interpersonal communication, which is how people use communication to manage and pursue their own personal relationships. My advisor, Dr. Patricia Amason, is a professor at the University of Arkansas who also focuses her research on interpersonal communication. She is overseeing my thesis project which addresses how married foster parents deal with stress while fostering. This project also will look at how you and your spouse rely on one another for support and how satisfied you are in your marriage. Regardless of whether you foster now or have in the past, your experience is unique and will add to the information regarding foster care. Research investigating family communication and foster care is hard to find with no studies addressing how the married couple is affected by the presence of foster children. That being said, I find it very important to hear the side of the foster parent and how your communication with your spouse is affected by fostering, both positively and negatively.

To fully understand how communication between you and your spouse is affected by fostering a child or children, I designed a survey for you to fill out at your convenience. The survey asks questions about how you and your spouse deal with certain situations, how you and your spouse discipline your children (foster, biological, and/or adopted), and how you and your spouse deal with the stress that comes with parenting your children. My hope is to shed light on a subject that has not been studied and needs to be. I hope to be a foster parent in the future and believe research focusing on married foster parents highly important to better understanding the fostering experience.

To share your experiences, go to the internet link below which will lead you directly to the survey delivered through Survey Monkey, an online survey center. I understand that confidentiality is very important and want to assure you that your name, address, and phone numbers will not be asked for at any time. The foster agency has given this letter to you so that I would not have any connection that could threaten your privacy. I will have no access to any personal information about you. I only will see what you share on the survey. By completing the survey, you are giving me permission to use what you write in my study, but again you will be completely anonymous.

If you would like further information about the study or have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email at kerussel@uark.edu or Patricia Amason at pamason@uark.edu or by phone at 479-575-5959. You also may contact the University of Arkansas' Research Compliance Officer Ro Windwalker if you have any questions about research procedures at 479-575-2208. Thank you for your participation and your willingness to foster. The link for the survey is: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YT5LSK8>

Sincerely,

Katie Russell

Patricia Amason, PhD D
Associate Professor/Associate Department Chair

Appendix C (Emails)

Original Email Sent January 7, 2014:

Dear Foster Parent,

I am a second-year graduate student at the University of Arkansas and am studying the foster care system in Arkansas. I am particularly interested in your relationship with your spouse as foster parents and have been working on my thesis to look at the marriage relationship of foster parents. For the formal email with the University of Arkansas letterhead, please see the attachment at the bottom of the email. I have put together a survey to understand how fostering effects and is effected by marriage. The survey link is below and the formal letter to you is the PDF attachment at the bottom. The survey will take no longer than 20 minutes and is only multiple choice. Please take the time to complete the survey and, by completing the survey, you will be eligible to enter a drawing for a \$100 gift card to Wal-Mart. If you have any questions feel free to email me at kerussel@uark.edu or contact the IRB office in charge of my thesis procedures at 479-575-2208. Thank you for your help in my study and for choosing to be a foster parent.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YT5LSK8>

Sincerely,

Katie Russell

Graduate Student

Communication Department

University of Arkansas

Reminder Sent January 17, 2014:

Dear Foster Parent,

This is a reminder to please complete the foster parent survey if you have not already done so. If you have completed the survey, please do not do so again. The survey link is below and will take you directly to the short survey. It will take no longer than 15 or 20 minutes to complete. Also, before submitting your survey, feel free to follow the directions to enter into a \$100 Wal-Mart gift card drawing. Please take the time to complete this survey as it will aid in my research to inform both present and future foster parents. Your experience is unique and will be very helpful to my thesis. Thank you so much for fostering!

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YT5LSK8>

Katie Russell

Graduate Student

Communication Department

University of Arkansas

Reminder Sent January 23, 2014:

Dear Foster Parent,

Here is another reminder to please complete the survey from the link below. The survey will take no longer than 20 minutes and is only multiple choice. I want to fully understand the role as

foster parent and your expertise will help so much. Please take the time to complete the survey and, by completing the survey, you will be eligible to enter a drawing for a \$100 gift card to Wal-Mart. The survey will close at 8 AM on February 3. If you have any questions feel free to email me at kerussel@uark.edu or contact the IRB office in charge of my thesis procedures at 479-575-2208. Thank you for your help in my study and for choosing to be a foster parent.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YT5LSK8>

Sincerely,
Katie Russell
Graduate Student
Communication Department
University of Arkansas

Reminder Sent January 28, 2014:

Dear Foster Parents,

This is a reminder for you to complete the following survey about your experience as foster parent. Your foster children will in no way be spoken about and your confidentiality is secure. Make sure you and your spouse both complete the survey because that doubles your chances to win a \$100 Wal-Mart gift card. By completing this very short survey, you are increasing knowledge for future foster parents about what fostering actually looks like and how it affects the marriage and support with your spouse. This survey will close February 10, but please complete the survey as soon as possible to aid in the compilation process of data. I am so glad you have decided to foster and I hope this survey helps you to learn more about yourselves and your spouse. Communication is important in marriage and parenting, and this study will shed light on the role it plays in your particular experience. Please feel free to email me with questions at kerussel@uark.edu. The survey will take about 10 minutes and is only multiple choice. Thanks again!

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YT5LSK8>

Katie Russell
Graduate Student
Department of Communication
University of Arkansas

Final Reminder Sent February 10, 2014:

Dear Foster Parent,

This is the absolute last reminder to please complete the survey (the link is below). Due to the crazy weather we've had lately, I understand that it has been hard to juggle kids and work and the normal day to day duties and how on earth would you have time for a survey. So, it seems easier to give it one more week to ask that you take 10 minutes to do the survey. As I'm gathering data from parents, I realize how busy you are and I value the time you give to your families. This study is going to help current and future foster parents as they go through their journey of fostering. Please help out by completing the study below. Your children will not be directly asked after and no distinguishing information will be asked either. Also, by both you and your

spouse completing the survey and both emailing me, you have double the chance of winning a \$100 gift card to Wal-Mart, so please make sure both you and your spouse complete the survey. Feel free to email me with questions about the study or survey. Thank you so much for your willingness to foster and your help in my study.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YT5LSK8>

(You may have to copy and paste the link into the search bar if clicking on it does not take you to the page)

Katie Russell
Graduate Student
Department of Communication
University of Arkansas

Appendix D
(Survey Questions)

1. What is your biological sex?
 - a) male
 - b) female

2. In which Arkansas County do you reside?
 - a) Benton County
 - b) Faulkner County
 - c) Pulaski County
 - d) Sebastian County
 - e) Washington County
 - f) Other _____

3. How many children under the age of 18 years old live in your household?
 - a) None
 - b) 1
 - c) 2
 - d) 3
 - e) 4 or more

4. For each child living in your home, please answer as applies.
 - a. Child 1
 - a) Age
 - a. less than 1 year
 - b. 1-3
 - c. 4-6
 - d. 7-9
 - e. 10-12
 - f. 13-15
 - g. 16-18
 - b) Sex
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c) Connection
 - a. Biological
 - b. Adopted from foster care
 - c. Adopted from other
 - d. Foster
 - b. Child 2
 - a) Age
 - a. less than 1 year
 - b. 1-3
 - c. 4-6

- d. 7-9
- e. 10-12
- f. 13-15
- g. 16-18

b) Sex

- a. Male
- b. Female

c) Connection

- a. Biological
- b. Adopted from foster care
- c. Adopted from other
- d. Foster

c. Child 3

a) Age

- a. less than 1 year
- b. 1-3
- c. 4-6
- d. 7-9
- e. 10-12
- f. 13-15
- g. 16-18

b) Sex

- a. Male
- b. Female

c) Connection

- a. Biological
- b. Adopted from foster care
- c. Adopted from other
- d. Foster

d. Child 4

a) Age

- a. less than 1 year
- b. 1-3
- c. 4-6
- d. 7-9
- e. 10-12
- f. 13-15
- g. 16-18

b) Sex

- a. Male
- b. Female

c) Connection

- a. Biological
- b. Adopted from foster care
- c. Adopted from other
- d. Foster

e. If you have 5 or more children residing in your home, please describe each of their ages, sex, and whether they are biological, adopted from foster care, adopted from another agency, or fostered in your home.

5. Do you have foster children currently residing in your home?

- a) Yes
- b) No

6. How many foster children currently live in your household?

- a) None
- b) 1
- c) 2
- d) 3
- e) 4 or more

7. Did you adopt the foster child into your family?

- a) Yes
- b) No

Appendix E

Please answer the following questions with regard to fostering a child using the following scale:
1 being very strongly agree and 7 being very strongly disagree.

1. My spouse and I have/had difficulty deciding how to discipline our foster child or children.
2. My spouse and I experience(d) much emotional stress associated with the child's or children's past (i.e., physical abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, or associated problems).
3. My spouse and I experience(d) much emotional stress at the prospect of the foster child or children being moved to another location.
4. My spouse and I experience much stress as foster parents.

Appendix F

Please answer the following questions with regard to fostering a child using the following scale:
1 being very strongly agree and 7 being very strongly disagree.

1. My spouse really tries to help me.
2. I get the emotional help and support I need from my spouse.
3. I can talk about my problems with my spouse.
4. My spouse is willing to help me make decisions.
5. I can count on my spouse when things go wrong.
6. I have a spouse with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.
7. My spouse is around when I am in need.
8. My spouse is a real source of comfort to me.
9. My spouse cares about my feelings.

Appendix G

Please answer the following questions with regard to fostering a child using the following scale:
1 being very strongly agree and 7 being very strongly disagree.

1. My spouse and I have a good marriage.
2. My relationship with my spouse is very stable.
3. My marriage is strong.
4. My relationships with my spouse makes me very happy.
5. I feel like part of a team with my spouse.
6. I have often seriously considered ending my relationship with my spouse.
7. I often wish I had not married my spouse.
8. My spouse and I are very similar in our attitudes toward most things.
9. My spouse and I engage in many outside interests together.
10. I am very committed to making my marriage last.